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Painted by
Edith Blight Thompson

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AN EXHIBITION

of

INTERIORS

by

EDITH BLIGHT THOMPSON



1882

With a Note of Introduction by HENRY McBride

KINGORE GALLERIES JANUARY 18-29, 1921 NEW YORK



LIBRARY OF MRS. WILLIAM K. VANDERBILT II



RS. THOMPSON'S career as an artist is a matter of the last few years—and sufficiently simple to have been resolved into three chapters with the headings: "She liked paintings," "She

wished to paint," "She painted"—in any other age than this. The present age insists upon details and, if possible, something Freudian. Fortunately, there is something Freudian in Mrs. Thompson's case. That is, if it be Freudian to have come of a line that had already contributed remarkably to the arts, to have resisted the destiny towards painting in early youth, and to have yielded to it later.

One of the chief lights of her family, upon the mother's side, was the eminent sculptor Horatio Greenough, who indeed was one of the chief lights of the nation in his period and who cannot be ignored now by those who wish to appraise correctly the beginnings of our art history. His was a charming personality, and that it was essentially artistic as well as charming is proved well enough by his writings, preserved for us by his biographer. One of his sayings sufficiently attests his calibre. Of the Washington Monument, the plans for which were then agitating the country, he said: "The obelisk has to my eye a singular aptitude in its form and character to call attention to a spot memorable in history. It says but one word but it speaks loud. If I understand its voice, it says 'Here!' It says no more." That was a "regular artist's" remark.

That it was dwelling upon the Horatio Greenough tradition that turned Mrs. Thompson's thoughts to art would be, perhaps, too much to say, for who is there who can say when a mental bias begins? But certainly the tendency was there, and when the occasion later arose for some overdoor and other decorations, in Mrs. Thompson's Long Island residence, "Longfields," it seemed a natural thing for her to do them. These were but copies, but the success of them gave the impetus towards original work. It was the late Howard Cushing who first insisted upon regarding Mrs. Thompson as a professional, and upon his advice her first painting, a study of an Empire room that has since been turned into a studio, was submitted to an Academy jury. The jury accepted it, somewhat to the artist's surprise, for there were obvious uncertainties in the perspective. A later and less strained production— "The Green Room" was accepted at the Paris Salon where it elicited favorable comment. Both these early works are included in the exhibition by way of contrast to what came later. Indeed, Mrs. Thompson's progress can be traced step by step in the little exhibition, and the connoisseur need scarcely be told that the studies of the salon of the Duchesse de Noailles and of the drawing room at "Longfields" are of the most recent. In addition to the agreeable color and complete possession of the subjects, there is plenty of evidence in them that the artist has arrived at terms of intimacy and comprehension with her paint-brushes.

And having gone so far with her "interiors," Mrs. Thompson seems clearly indicated as the historian of the period, especially as she appears to have no rival in this field, Walter Gay, a foeman worthy of any one's steel, having elected to paint foreign interiors exclusively. But to paint history in this town, one must paint swiftly. The various Vanderbilt drawing rooms and libraries, and the rooms at "Longfields," here recorded in paint, might indicate to a foreigner the cosmopolitanism that Colonel Roosevelt deplored but was powerless to prevent. The Duchesse de Noailles' salon, with its green lights from the garden pleasantly tinging its walls, suggests unchanging calm and an immunity from time's ravages, and although seemingly difficult to paint, must on the other hand have been easy to apprehend, its character being so clear. The best American rooms of the day, on the contrary, are not so easy to seize, for though we have about decided upon the kind of eighteenth-centuryism that we prefer, we have not yet lived into it long enough for the style to have become fixed. At any rate, it is all a far cry from the fashions of our forefathers. Colonial drawing-rooms were austere. They were vastly more elegant than the black walnut and vases of pampas-plumes that distinguished our Civil War interiors, but neither the austerity nor the pampasplumes longer survive. No one has the courage for either: New York is still in a state of flux.

The art of painting interiors, as such, like the art of painting landscape, is a comparatively modern inven-

tion. It is a metier within a metier, like so many of our other specializations. There have, of course, always been "interiors," but in the classic precedent they were usually backgrounds to some drama of figures. The Dutch and Flemish excelled in this line of work, and Vermeer, De Hooch and Terborch have had the flattery of imitation paid them almost too much by modern artists. The portrait by Jan van Eyck of himself and wife has always been considered a miracle both for its portraiture and its still-life. Here realism was carried so far that even the tiny reflections of figures that may be discerned in the polished chandeliers have been thought by some critics with sharp eyes to be portraits. There was something in the Dutch temperament that knew no drudgery in work, and to whatever degree of finish Ian van Evck lent himself he was never stilted. Stiltedness in art is the unforgivable sin. We have many still who finish to kill but, alas, their work is a labor for them, and labor without pleasure is a depression to the spirits—especially if they attempt to pass it off as art. Mrs. Thompson doesn't finish to the extent the Dutch did, but she communicates the fun she had in painting—and that's always an excellent test. James Stephens, the writer, showing me the manuscript of his "Demigods," which he had just completed, said: "I think it's good. It ought to be good—I enjoyed writing every word of it."

HENRY McBride.

CATALOGUE



- 1. Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt's Library at Westbury, Long Island.
- 2. A salon of the Duchesse de Noailles, Paris.
- 3. Drawing-Room at "Longfields."
- 4. Drawing-Room at "Longfields."
- 5. The Green Room.
- 6. The Altman Gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 7. The Studio.
- 8. The Studio.
- 9. Entrance Hall, Residence of Lloyd Warren, Esq.
- 10. Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt's Drawing-Room.



DRAWING-ROOM AT "LONGFIELDS"



SALON OF THE DUCHESSE DE NOAILLES



ENTRANCE HALL, RESIDENCE OF LLOYD WARREN, ESQ.

